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James, C. L. R.. *The Nobbie Stories for Children & Adults.*

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In “Letters to Literary Critics,” C. L. R. James remarks that he does not read a writer’s letters and his life to understand his work; rather, he reads the work to understand his letters and life. These remarks initiate a perspective of critical reading as opposed to the positivistic one that predominantly seeks to locate reality in fiction and actuality in invention, and opens up new avenues and possibilities for critical reading. Interestingly, this statement invites a border-crossing reading of the latest addition to the James corpus, *The Nobbie Stories for Children & Adults*, a collection of thirty-seven letters written in the form of children’s stories. James composed these stories for his four-year old son, Nobbie, who was left behind in the United States with his mother, Constance Webb, when he was deported to London in 1953 at the high tide of McCarthyism. The dual nature of this collection, as both James’ fictional invention and family correspondence that intends to foster the moral and intellectual growth of his son, foregrounds a side of James that has received insufficient critical attention. *The Nobbie Stories* testifies to the diversity of James’ writing and the range of his intellectual gifts as a writer, a cultural critic, a political thinker and a revolutionary organizer.

The book opens with a foreword by Anna Grimshaw, James’ final research assistant and the editor of the *C.L.R. James Reader* (1992), arguably a milestone selection and compilation of James’ works. In the foreword, Grimshaw gives a brief account of James’ literary and political career as a labor organizer and a leader of the Pan-African movement, his peregrinations in Europe, the Americas and Africa as a perspicacious observer of the world, and how his peregrinations shaped his revolutionary vision and intellectual horizons. Despite the numerous titles James has earned, Grimshaw concludes that he is fundamentally a thinker and “preeminently a writer” (xiv). His publications, from his first attempt at a novel entitled *Minty Alley* (1936) to *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (1966), constitute an oeuvre that spans a range of genres including fiction, autobiography, plays, literary criticism, editorials, newspaper articles, letters and newsletter writing, and maps his political and revolutionary trajectory over the decades across the continents.

The majority of James’ works are conceived and written in the period between the rise of totalitarianism in the 1930s and the latter period of the Cold War. Attesting to his capacity as a revolutionary historian and thinker, the emergence of *World Revolution* (1936), *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938) continues to stimulate scholarship and academic debate on the relationship between Europe and the colonies, the significance of the Russian Revolution and the political and cultural survivals and transformations of the Third World (x). James’ vision as a revolutionary thinker and his meditations and reflections on the fate of the West Indies as an organic part of the colonial world enable his dialectical critique of Russian Marxism and allow him to constructively link the emancipation of black people with the proletarian movement and to claim further that enslaved black people are not only the participants but also the vanguard of this movement. Following Grimshaw’s foreword is Constance Webb’s introduction to this collection, in which she contextualizes James’ deportation during the political persecution engendered by Joseph McCarthy’s crusade against the presumed

infiltration of Russian communism. Despite the fact that James and Webb were going through a tempestuous divorce during the years when these letters were written, Webb apparently reconciles herself to the failed marriage at the end of her life when these letters are edited. Her short yet loving introduction to each story informs readers of the situation in which each story is written and presents James as a father who spares no efforts in this attempt to mitigate the geographical distance between him and his son, and who embraces being a father with joy and a sense of responsibility. This collection crystallizes a meeting point between James' public and personal life and sheds new light on his efforts as an activist and cultural critic.

Webb also reminds readers in the general introduction that these stories are not edited in chronological sequence due to the loss of letters and the lack of dates for some letters that were preserved, but each story stands on its own and is well integrated into the alternative world of children's fancy and imagination. To construct a wonderland that constitutively captures children's fascination, James draws on a heterogeneous cast of seemingly absurd characters: two little boys—Good Boongko and Bad boo-boo-loo, Nicholas the worker, Moby Dick, Tweet-Tweet the bird, two fleas Philbert and Flibert, Bruno the bulldog etc., who form an imagined community guided by the principle of governance by the people and for the people. Chaired by the head of the community, Bruno the bulldog, meetings open to all are held in times of need and urgency to discuss the community's affairs; self-governance is reinforced by the establishment of its own newspaper when the society at large is overshadowed by injustice and bias and hence serves as a counterpoint to the self-governing community when the community's voice is ignored. James' insertion of Nobbie into the story as a character in the company of Good Boongko and Bad boo-boo-loo and Bad boo-boo-loo's appearance in King Arthur's court, to a large extent highlights James' wit and imagination in his fictional construction of a community depicted as an organic whole rather than a utopia. Never short of domestic and external confrontations and corresponding communal resolutions, *The Nobbie Stories* remind us of James' skill in traversing the symbolic and the real.

While writing these stories, James unconsciously responds to the age-old question about the nature of literature: Should literature instruct, educate or entertain readers? This collection eloquently exemplifies a type of literature that serves all of the above purposes with a differentiated degree of priority for each. Stories like "Serial not Cereal," "Police Proclamation" and "The Dirty Snowball and White Raincoat" are essentially mischievous and cheerful, which children will have a good laugh over; however, laughter is also the medium through which the morals of the stories are conveyed. "The Ghost at the Window," "The Bomb Threat," "The Teacher Who Fears Rats," "Mighty Mouse and the Conceited Cowboy" and "Bad Boy Rides in a Horse Race," with their agenda of instruction supplemented by comic suspense, also introduce a sense of value, honesty, modesty and the paramount importance of friendship that elevates the intimacy of human relationships to harmony between man and animal. To impart knowledge and cultivate values is the persistently latent and ultimate leitmotif of this collection. James not only weaves into the stories some of the most spectacular landmarks in architecture and the

masterpieces of sculpture, but also influential historical figures, Bible stories, characters from myths and literary canons. Letters about the Eiffel Tower, the Liverpool Cathedral, Michelangelo and the Statue of David, and the Statue of Apollo offer Nobbie a glimpse of European culture and articulate a father's longing to be with his son. Seeking recourse to the fundamental process of cognition, James registers these names and objects in Nobbie's mind to coax out a childhood desire to project the subjective onto the objective world and to connect the imaginary with the real. With stories about the good deeds of Bad boo-boo-loo and the imperfections, foibles and infrequent mistakes of Good Boongko, James provides further guidance in Nobbie's perception of the objective by instilling the importance of dialectics and always the coexistence of good and evil.

While accomplishing the purposes of instruction and entertainment, these stories also unequivocally betray James' own preoccupations with the progress of the postcolonial movement and identity formation in third world countries. James' deportation and life in a racially charged society leads to his keen awareness of the tension and uneasiness in which Nobbie will inevitably be mired. Therefore, this collection contains precious moments that manifest James' care in offsetting the impact of colonialism and racism on Nobbie and guiding him to a comfortable self-identification as an African American. Exhilarated by the independence of Ghana, the first British colony in Africa that breaks away from British colonial shackles in "Ghana Independence," James brings Nobbie home to the idea that, contrary to the belief many people firmly yet blindly cling to, Africa is not backward, and that its assumed backwardness and inferiority are only excuses to colonize its people. His later juxtaposition of the Ghana independence fighters with George Washington and William Tell, the national hero of Switzerland, effectively blurs the color line and restates the fluidity of cultural boundaries through reaffirming freedom and sovereignty as the shared political vision and common pursuits of people despite the various labels that divide them.

Closely associated with the concept of freedom and independence and central to James' political vision encoded in this collection is his conceptualization of the republic and democracy. When introducing Michelangelo as the most remarkable sculptor of the Greek republic, James manages to inform Nobbie, in a language accessible to a four-year-old, that the politics of a republic is characteristic of its citizens' equal chance to participate in state affairs through voting for the representatives directly exercising supreme power. Then "Emperor Jones and the African Drums" celebrates the prevailing restoration of the African republic when Good Boongko and Bad boo-boo-loo, beating African drums, exhaust the tyrant Emperor Jones who is consequently captured by the democratic fighters. Illustrated by the deeds of the fictional characters and substantiated by those in real life, republic and democracy, tyranny and dictatorship, are not absolute binaries, nor are they abstract concepts beyond children's perception and comprehension. James' immersion in the excitement and hope brought about by the Hungarian Revolution sparks the composition of "Children in the Resistance," which unveils the valor of Hungarian children lying down in front of the tanks to stop the Russians' progression. Moreover,

evoking Japanese children's fight against fascism and British children's struggle for a just cause, James expands children's revolutionary role to a transnational context and reiterates the universal positivity of democracy and freedom.

In the general introduction Webb contends that these stories are "morality tales in the tradition of Grimm and Aesop," cleverly told "with sly humor, suspense and sometimes absurdity" (xx). In addition, what I find most impressive are the conciseness, lucidity and transparency of James' language. As the title of this book suggests, this is not a book only for children. With its self-generating conversations with historical events and characters, and conspicuously with James' other works, it challenges adults to consider James' role both as a public and private figure in this particular intersection of his life and work. Growing up reading Western classics, for example, *Vanity Fair* (1847) more than twenty times, familiarizing himself with Roman and Greek cultures, James inherits the language of Western masters and sustains his lifelong passion for literature. More significantly, he revolutionizes the language to such an extent that the efforts of his oeuvre to construct a recognizable and locatable identity not characterized by imposed distortions and inventions for the enslaved, the disenfranchised and the disadvantaged are continuously being brought into new light. As James remarks in the preface to his semi-autobiography, *Beyond a Boundary*, without hesitation and in quiet resignation, "to establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew." Apparently James himself ventured into many lands that Caesar never knew, and more importantly dedicates himself to a noble cause whose scope and magnitude Caesar could never imagine.